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DRAMA AND MUSIC

ANOTHER AMERICAN OPERA

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

THE Metropolitan Opera Company, pursuing its excellent and indispensable policy of giving every season an opera by an American composer, has added to its répertoire a new work of unimpeachably local origin. Desirous, naturally, of obtaining a score which would represent contemporary American music-making at its best, the Metropolitan chose an opera by Mr. Reginald De Koven: *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, text by Mr. Percy MacKaye.

Mr. De Koven displayed intelligence and taste in selecting Mr. MacKaye's play as his subject. Except for Mr. W. J. Henderson's *Cyrano* libretto (an almost perfect text for operatic use), *The Canterbury Pilgrims* is the best American libretto that the Metropolitan has thus far discovered. Mr. Brian Hooker's *Mona* was poetically worthy but of criminal dulness as drama; the text of *Madeleine* which served Mr. Victor Herbert was paltry, and that of Mr. Converse's *Pipe of Desire* was absurd.

Mr. MacKaye's text (an adaptation of his earlier play of like title with Chaucer as hero) is not by any means ideal as a libretto for an operatic comedy. It is too long; it lacks clarity; it is often tedious. One does not always understand what is happening on the stage, even after a dutiful preliminary session with the printed text. Being sung in English, it was, naturally, almost unintelligible. One hearing the opera without previous intercourse with the book must have assumed that Miss Edith Mason, for example, was singing English words; but not one of them was intelligible to us. Herr Sembach, as the poet-hero, managed to project, through a dense Teutonic fog of

diction, sounds somewhat resembling the native tongue of our land; but this was too persistently *Deutschland über Chaucer* to be agreeable to the ear or congruous to the mind. It is a pity that the Metropolitan could not improvise an American tenor for this very American (or, at least, Anglo-Saxon) occasion. There must be some of them extant. However, it is not our present purpose to discuss the ancient topic of Opera in English, save to observe that it was once more demonstrated that, under the conditions now obtaining at the Metropolitan, it makes not the slightest difference to an auditor what language is sung upon the stage, assuming that his naïve expectation is to hear the words. If Herr Sembach *must* sing tenor parts for us, no matter what language they are written in, he can be infinitely better understood, even by a *matinée* audience drawn largely from the suburban jungles, when he sings a text of Wagner's than when he sings a text of Percy MacKaye's.

However, we have read the text of *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, and so we know that much of it is admirably suited to music. Mr. MacKaye has been quoted as saying that "the librettist's job is that of a dramatist rather than that of a poet"; that "words exist in opera merely because the singers must, of course, have something to sing." That is true only in part—it depends upon the individual librettist, and upon the kind of composer the librettist has happened to snare. In the *Pelléas et Mélisande* of Debussy, for example, the words are immeasurably important—the drama inheres far more in the speech of Mélisande and Golaud and Arkel and Pelléas than in the encounters and convergences of the action; and Debussy, in setting Maeterlinck's text, has contrived to let every syllable count.

In *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, Mr. MacKaye has not exemplified his convictions. The virtue of his play resides in the words, which have charm and character, rather than in the action, which is confused and turgid and, at its best, ill-adapted to the expressional capacities of Mr. De Koven. Tried by his own test, Mr. MacKaye's libretto would fail to pass. An opera, he has said, "must tell its story to the eye"; the audience "by looking at it" should be "swept away on the emotional undercurrent, interpreted by the music." As an effort in æsthetic generalization that is hardly creditable to Mr. MacKaye's intellectuals. *Tristan und Isolde*, dramatically considered, would not mean much

to Mr. MacKaye if he confined himself merely to "looking at it": indeed, it is precisely because the last act of *Tristan* does *not* "tell its story to the eye" that those unfortunates who are deaf to its incomparable music complain so bitterly of its longueurs.

The obvious truth is, of course, that it makes no difference whether a play intended for music is the long and cumulative projection of a mood (as *Salome* is), or the intricate unfolding of a spiritual tragedy (as the *Ring* is), or the exposition of an action (as *Die Meistersinger* is), so long as it is intelligible and engrossing. The trouble with *The Canterbury Pilgrims* is that it is intelligible and engrossing only in spots. Despite himself, Mr. MacKaye cannot help interesting us less in the intrigue of his plot than in those moments when he merely "writes words"—as in the speech of Chaucer at the beginning of the Second Act, in which the poet describes the ride from London to Bob-up-and-down; as in the love-making of Chaucer and the Prioress. The latter instance is shamelessly a case of mere "words": for Chaucer and his lady in this scene are not kissing or swooning in each other's arms or plotting a passionately headlong elopement: they are merely talking about the fluting of young frogs, the piping of the yellow-hammer from his coppice, the lying-down of the hills like sheep, and St. Ruth and her dropped sickle. Here Mr. MacKaye is flagrantly static and "lyrical," a spinner of engaging talk; yet he is nowhere more memorable. Here his libretto is at its best. Yet, throughout, it has touches of captivating buoyancy, a mood of comedy that it is not excessive to call Chaucerian, a drifting and fugitive breath of that immemorially romantic England which has haunted the imaginations of all poets who have loved her—

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day,
And laughter, learnt of friends. . . .

—these things make a special place in the affections for *The Canterbury Pilgrims*.

It is unfortunate that Mr. Reginald De Koven encountered *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, and was encouraged to set it to music. We have a vision of the kind of opera this might have been: an opera with music written by a composer of poetic and delicate imagination; a composer who could be lyrical without being sentimental; who could

write merrily without being trivial, robustly without being common. The score of such a composer, written for such a text as *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, would have had something of the spiritual and emotional quality of *Die Meistersinger* and of the best moments in *Der Rosenkavalier*. It would have been a thing of gay loveliness and permanent delight.

Mr. De Koven's admirers have been at pains to tell us that he carefully refrained from writing in this score like Wagner or Strauss or Debussy or Stravinsky. Only a fool would have wanted him to do so. Heaven save us from feeble American transpositions of European masters! All that one would have asked of Mr. De Koven was that he perform the impossible task of writing as he never could and never can write: that is to say, like a musician of creative imagination and distinguished style, rather than like a facile *routinier* of operetta. It would be dishonest to evade frankness of characterization: Mr. De Koven, with doubtless the best intentions in the world, has performed an act of degradation upon a subject and a text worthy of the happiest inspirations of a composer of gifts. For a libretto of rich possibilities, he has written music that is for the most part common, trivial, stale, and dull; that at its best is merely pretty, and at its worst is on a level with the vapid and machine-made platitudes of the popular song.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.